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Gorbachev tries public approach

Appeal seen as a bid to polish image

By Don Kirk
USA TODAY

Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev appeared the model of a modern leader Wednesday — live on TV in an unprecedented display for domestic and foreign viewers.

Analysts agreed on that much about Gorbachev's new reformist image but disagreed sharply on whether he had waited too long to talk about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

His appeal for a conference on nuclear safety, in particular, appeared as an effort at rationalizing his procrastination — and uncertainty.

"He's trying to retrieve the initiative," said Harry Gelman, former CIA Soviet specialist now with the Rand Corp. "That's what they always do."

Marshall Goldman of Harvard's Russian Research Center saw Gorbachev's belated response as having "tarnished his image" and doubted if he could repair the damage.

"The hoo-haw is mounting inside and outside the country every day," Goldman said.

By delaying 18 days in addressing the issue, he added, Gorbachev had belied earlier promises "to bring about great reform" — and to do it "with candor and openness."

To Stephen Cohen, Princeton professor of Soviet politics, Gorbachev was still "the most Westernized Soviet leader since Lenin."

It's "silly to indict him" for Chernobyl, said Cohen, since "there has never been a nuclear calamity like this."

Columbia University's Jonathan Sanders expressed the view that Gorbachev had been



LIVE BROADCAST: Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev addresses the Soviet people on live television. AP

unusually frank in releasing details, but simply had failed to understand foreign pressure for information.

"He doesn't appreciate what levels of anxiety he created in the West," Sanders said. By waiting to adopt a "deliberate assessment," he said, the Kremlin "opened a loophole for people to criticize."

Almost immediately after CNN had finished its live broadcast of Gorbachev's speech, Vitaly Churkin of the Soviet Embassy in Washington appeared on CNN in defense of the boss. His government, he said, gave out information as

soon as it had it.

Embassy spokesman Igor Bulay insisted Gorbachev was indeed "more open" than his predecessors but he had wanted his government "to first of all collect reliable data."

Bulay said Soviet leaders had often spoken live on TV, but Gorbachev's appearance in midcrisis recalled Josef Stalin's radio appeal for support for "mother Russia" after the 1941 Nazi invasion.

Like Stalin, said Goldman, Gorbachev "hid for a while and then said something."